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THE FUNDAMENTALS OF AN EDUCATION

BY ROLAND G. USHER

WHEN the mere ability to read and write ceased to be the definition of the completely educated man, the problem of education assumed a new phase. How much more should an education include? When, too, the privileges of an educated man ceased to confer immunity from the hangman, if the learned gentleman should so far forget himself as to commit murder, the practical value of an education also became less obvious. What was an education to be good for? The methods by which men made money had no relation to the sort of education then accessible: an education for business necessarily waited until the relation between business and education was made obvious by an age of machinery and science. Hence the notion that an education was primarily intended to provide gentlemen of means with culture and amusement. The days of high thinking and low living have passed—except for university professors. The man who is educated now wants to make money; the monied man who used to be contentedly uneducated now clamors for the satisfactions of the intellectual life; and, strangest of all, the university professors, who are presumably educated, are beginning to agitate for salaries at least as large as the wages of railroad engineers and master carpenters, if not as large as those of the plutocratic plumbers and lead burners.

Not since the Renaissance has the question of the meaning and value of education been so widely discussed with such frank expressions of opinion as today. There seems to be a general agreement that the college curriculum lacks content; that it neither fits a man to practice a profession nor to earn a living, neither makes him a useful citizen nor a human being able to live with himself without intolerable ennui. There is a general conviction that it ought to per-

form all these services for the individual and for the community. But the problem is necessarily practical. The reformers must not demand of the colleges what the existing faculties cannot teach, or what the present students do not wish to learn. A curriculum must somehow be devised which will be generally conceded to be as valuable to the community as to the individual. What the college curriculum needs is unity, content, a tangible object worth the student's while; something which will commend itself to him as obviously valuable in his first state of ignorance rather than in the stage of dawning intelligence which the majority eventually reach. We want a curriculum that will convince him college is worth his while before he starts, not after he is graduated or when he is regretting, fifteen years later, that he did not start.

It is simple for students, faculties and corporations to blame each other, to complain of each other's lack of intelligence, and to declare that no satisfactory substitute for brains has ever been discovered. It is easy to say that no universal pink pill, good for all pale students, ever will be discovered; that no single curriculum can possibly meet all needs. The difficulty is probably partly in the faculty, partly in the students, partly due to the relation of the universities to the public schools and to the control of the universities by corporations of business men. But these are symptoms of the disease, and vituperation does not lead to remedies.

But are not the faults of the present curriculum the results of the characteristic virtues of modern scholarship, the result of carrying a point of view to its logical conclusion and of maintaining it a little too long? The great minds who initiated modern research concluded that the great difficulty in all fields was the lack of any considerable body of accurate, verifiable, detailed information. Notions of history and science, like propositions about the creation of the earth or the origin of the race, were speculative guesses, the ingenuity of which did not excuse their lack of basis in known facts.

In truth, a very little good evidence, closely analyzed, had sufficed to upset whole areas of accepted ideas about man and the world. The scholars therefore consciously put behind them the whole and began a detailed study of

its parts. They went to work on the fossils of the earth and the fossils of literature; they dissected the human body, Shakespeare, Domesday Book, and the constitution of the United States. Darwin studied the earthworm as others analyzed the inorganic substances. The method was valid; the scholars were right; only in that way could truth be obtained; and the great structure of ascertained facts which modern scholarship has achieved is due to the conscious choice between detailed research, apparently severed from interpretation, and the older attempt to interpret the world by guessing at what it ought to be.

But the scholars were wrong when they proceeded to shape the college curriculum around this sort of research. They were in error when they supposed that the antiquities of the military boroughs, the use of the infinitive in Chaucer, and the opinion about prunes in Shakespeare's time would produce a cultural effect on the student, would make life more livable for him or make him a more useful member of the community. The scientific method has unquestionably thrust forward the bounds of knowledge further in two generations than the previous achievements of fifteen centuries. It has laid at last a secure foundation upon which coming generations may build without facing the constant tearing down of the whole and the building of it anew which the past has so often seen. But as a system of education for life and for living, it has been a failure. It will give our grandchildren something definite to think about, but it has forgotten to provide for us in the meantime.

Philosophy has been divorced from life and has become a study, only too often, of what men in the past erroneously thought life was. Psychology has regarded man as an anatomical specimen rather than as a social animal. Literature has become an introduction to philology, and has occupied itself with syntax, the counting of words, the origin of grammar. History has been specialized until its relation to life has departed; economics has been dehumanized into a round of everlasting speculations on problems of value and capital in a mythical world inhabited by hypothetical men.

At the same time, there had been valid reasons for the introduction of the scientific method into the curriculum. Nothing is finer than a college course which imparts a true

appreciation of the greatness and richness of the literary heritage of the race. But so few men were fitted to teach such a course creditably, and it was so easy for any man, however ill-equipped, to fake an appreciation of literature, that the universities abandoned such courses as impossible. It was better to stick to philology, to list historic or economic facts than to attempt something difficult to accomplish with distinction, and utterly valueless if not done with distinction. The colleges, where the majority of the faculty were perforce men who would be satisfied with the pay of a good factory superintendent, felt it better to do a less significant thing reasonably well than to aim so high and hit nothing.

It was also easy for the student to "stall," "bluff" and cheat in the interpretative courses. The purpose of the college was to train him to think for himself rather than to teach him some particular set of facts, and it was indispensable to force him to do some work and some thinking. The danger of broad, general courses was that his thinking was done for him. The danger of specialized courses was that he might never think about the problems they presented; but he was at least face to face with the problem of thought; the facts about which to think were at least definite. Not many will question the superiority of the modern method over the older curriculum it supplanted.

The error has lain in the failure to combine the two. Life has been lost in the maze of technicalities, not merely the life of the student, to whose epidermis the method has been applied with a toughening and a resistive rather than a penetrative effect, but the life of the world in the past and in the present has been practically forgotten in colleges. In order to get rid of the personal prejudices of the investigator which had worked such havoc, the subject was dehumanized and devitalized. To prevent the interpretation of history or literature by the projection into it of the present and to get rid of preconceived theories, the life of the organism was split up into sections and these were isolated from each other with a thoroughness which prevented the student from ever seeing the organism at all. To be sure, until we knew the arm as an arm, it was quite true that we should not appreciate its functions in the moving body, but it was no less true that the student wished—

perhaps with pitiable ignorance, but none the less ardently—to see the man as a whole and to see him in motion.

The scholars forgot that, though the process of providing the world with exact information about itself and about its past was necessary, the world, we ourselves included, had somehow to live in the meantime. We had to think something and it was cold comfort to tell us that by getting along for a couple of generations without thinking our grandchildren would have something significant to think about. There is now no reason for the continuation of this same degree of caution. A considerable bulk of reliable results has been obtained which can be set forth with some confidence and which does produce a pretty valid idea of life, ancient and modern. Let us take this result of scientific research and make it the center of the college curriculum. Let us study the results and relegate the process of getting more to the professional and graduate schools. Let us return to life itself as the backbone of education, and study man as a living organism rather than as a devitalized laboratory specimen or a constitutional peculiarity.

But with what part of the new synthesis shall we begin? Each professor will scramble to his feet to urge his specialty; each layman will subscribe to his own hobby. If we would see the whole man, and get any notion of his real career and possibilities, we shall be compelled sooner or later to view the natural and biological sciences as well as history, philosophy and literature. Life manifests itself in countless ways, and some part of life can be seen in any branch of study. But is it not true that some studies are harder to grasp than others, that some require more previous information and training, that some come nearer than others to presenting man alive and in action?

For the average man or woman I contend that the easiest approach is difficult enough, and that man comes nearer to living, moving and having being in history and political science than in the natural sciences or in philology. I do not mean what we have called history in the textbooks, but history in the largest sense, as a picture of all that man has been and has known, including political science and social history, commercial conditions, literature, art, and philosophy. Is it not true that half the subjects in the college curriculum are merely phases of what ought to be presented to the students as life, as history?

Such history has not been taught at all. Men objected that it was too large a subject for any one man to teach. Yet did not our colleges thereby confess their fundamental inadequacy, did they not agree to leave out the essence of life because it was difficult to handle? To be sure, many comforted themselves with the belief that so complex a fact as the life of the organism must be discovered by each man for himself. He must start a long distance from it with the detailed manifestations and collect a considerable area of information before he could hope to understand any of it. So the student began to collect material in the primary school, and found himself still hard at it in college and being graduated without any attempt to put it together. Nor did the professorial hopefulness satisfy him. "When you know enough to understand it, you will know it without being taught, and until it dawns upon you, it is idle to try to teach it to you."

The fundamental character, therefore, of history was not recognized by the college curriculum. It faded into the nebulous background of professorial consciousness. The one thing the student needed to know about each subject was carefully omitted from its consideration—its relation to life as it used to exist and as it exists now. There was the true object of his quest; there was the real answer he came to college to get.

Can there be much valid objection to the view that what most students need to make the college curriculum intelligible, to provide it with unity and content, is a more extended knowledge of political, economic, and social history? The proper preparation for English literature is not English philology, but English history. The real reason why students do not enjoy ancient literature is that they are reading about the thoughts of a people about whom they know nothing. Comparative jurisprudence is the study that illuminates ancient life and literature. On the other hand, the study of dates and constitutional technicalities is not cultural nor informing because it does not deal with life. All sections of life are essential to its wholeness, but for the majority is not the first and easiest step political and social history, and is it not by that broad road that the majority must enter into the Elysian fields of learning?

I would therefore make political and social history not

a portion of the curriculum, but its backbone, the necessary and normal approach to all subjects. The present curriculum seems to me overbalanced. History is relegated to the position of equality with its own parts, or is taught simply as a part of itself. I would have the approach to modern thought, modern industrial, modern economic history, and modern literature through modern political and social conditions. I would teach medical students sociology; I would teach legal students the social and physiological aspects of crime and the economic as well as the constitutional factors underlying modern life.

This proposition need involve nothing more than a change of emphasis in the present curriculum; it will not necessarily do more than call attention significantly to what the colleges already do, and it will show how easily they can do more and do it better. It requires only a regrouping of the departments as at present organized; it will merely emphasize their intimate relationship, and ought to create a new attitude of the student towards them. They will become conscious that they are teaching one subject, not twenty, and they should make the student conscious of it. But such a change of emphasis might well in time become the cause of an entire reshaping of university life, the establishment of a broader and more intimate relation between the universities and the common schools, between the universities and the general adult public.

The fact is that the world is groping for life, for a comprehension of life in the past and in the present which shall make both present and future more livable, more endurable, as well as more profitable. The universities should have led the way, have blazed the road, and thrown a beam of light along it. And they have done it. But they have outrun the community and are so far ahead that they are swallowed up by the blackness and are out of sight of the less competent who struggle after. They have been so busy finding the path and digging out the stones that they have forgotten that the real task is to lead the community as a whole along it.

It would be a mistake to regard my proposal as tantamount to an expansion of the history department. That would kill it at once. I would rather take this enormous subject out of the hands of one department, which has

found it impossible to teach it as a whole, which has been driven to reduce it to practical dimensions by omitting most of it, and I would put it into the hands of larger groups of men. I would rephrase the college curriculum so as to put its content into the foreground and its forms into the background.

There are many simple and obvious combinations. We might create a Faculty for the Study of Antiquity, comprehending all men teaching anything relating to ancient life, who should then so group and relate their courses as to form a coherent whole. There might be a Faculty for the Study of Mediaeval Life and probably several faculties for the study of different phases of modern life. The idea is possible of operation on the smallest or largest scale. Harvard could utilize it as easily as Amherst. It would be perfectly possible for any college to devote more attention to one period than to another, or to do particularly well one phase of one period, but the curriculum as printed in the catalogue would emphasize the content of what was taught and not the machinery by which it was taught.

The student might be restricted or left free. He might be required to take three or four elementary general courses, covering the fundamental notions of each group, and then be required to do enough work in the various phases of some one group until he had a well rounded notion of its meaning. Or he might be turned loose to elect anything he would, safe because the courses themselves were so shaped and arranged that he would not be able to wander far from some path that would lead him to life as a whole. He could still specialize in literature, or in history, or in science, but he would not be allowed to escape without knowing that his subject was part of a whole, that it was all related to life, and that it was all vital and interesting. The necessary requirements for the professional degrees could be easily built into such a curriculum, but we would turn out no more men who were simply specialists and no more aimless youths without any notions at all.

And would not the effect of such a method upon the faculties be good? Would it not humanize and broaden the men now teaching? Would it not soon prepare men to do such teaching better than the present faculties can, and better than any teaching has been done except by rare individ-

uals? Let us educate the faculties as well as the students. And will not the intending student, as yet ignorant of all that the college has to teach, and will not the general public be instantly convinced by such a curriculum that the college has something to offer which is worth the while of the greatest and of the humblest? They will see that there is something there for everyone, even for professors, and they will see that it must possess tangible value for man as an individual and as a part of society. Can there be any doubt of the value of the study of life?

If it becomes clear that such a curriculum cannot be taught by three thousand dollar men, will not the public be easily convinced that it is worth while to pay ten thousand dollars a year to men who can interpret life? Ten thousand dollars a year for men to teach the infinitives in Chaucer, mathematical formulas, historical precedents—certainly not! But for men to interpret life, to make it livable, to make it more endurable, to make it comprehensible? There will be no limit to the reward the community will be willing to pay to men who can give any reasonable promise of performing those functions. The universities and colleges will take on a new importance to the public. They will themselves view their own future more seriously. The interpreters' view of life will react upon life itself as the interpreters live it and as the community lives it.

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